

## **Foreword by Donald Maass, best-selling author of *Writing the Breakout Novel***

Writing advice from writers is stuff I approach with caution. Does that sound odd? For me it's not. As an agent I've worked with writers for thirty-four years. I've talked with them about craft. I've read their articles, studied their books, listened to their audiotapes, and attended their workshops.

Most have a pretty good grasp of their methods, but oftentimes there's a problem: Their methods are incomplete. Don't get me wrong. Many writers can beautifully explain how they do what they do—insofar as they understand it—and tell you how to do it, too. They have principles that they follow, tricks that work, schematic breakdowns that explain story, and sparkling metaphors to describe the desired outcome and illuminate the process of creating it. That's all good, but it's only part of what's needed.

You see, there are big chunks of the craft that most writers do without thinking. They're good at explaining what they're conscious of but unaware of what they do intuitively. They avoid mistakes and add flourishes as they write because it just feels wrong—or right. A draft passage on the page smells bad or looks good in the way food does as soon as you open the refrigerator door. Before you've picked it up, taken a look, peeled off the plastic cover, and sniffed ... well, you just know. Either it's good to eat, or it will make you sick.

There's a lot that most writers don't explain.

And then there's Steven James, whose book you are either holding in your hands or seeing on your screen.

*Story Trumps Structure* is something else again. If you have never before written a novel, this amazing guide will explain the basics like no other. Master the Ceiling Fan Principle, and you will have a foundation for novel writing that will save you years of trial and error. But Steven digs deeper. Everyone knows that tension is the engine of story, but from where does it spring? Different teachers will give you different answers, but Steven smashes through the fog and reduces all disagreements to rubble. His analysis of openings, acts, interweaving, story development, genres, and more are also devastatingly simple and yet not simplistic. Rather than give you a roadmap, he sets you free to create your own.

“There are no rules” is a scary thing for new novelists to hear, but Steven makes it empowering. Yes, there are no rules, but you are not without strong principles to keep you out of trouble. Furthermore, if you are the kind of writer who feels secure with structure and frameworks, Steven offers those, too. This book contains charts, graphs, and diagrams that organize everything from character status to story fixes. There’s even a formula or two, such as Context + Causality=Unity. Read on to see what that means.

From what I’m saying you might think that Steven is a formula guy, a my-way-or-no-way teacher of craft. Nope. Steven is both a deep thinker about story and someone who can make amorphous concepts as easy to understand as an Aesop fable. He is pithy and wise. I suspect he lives on a mountaintop. What for many novelists is intuitive, he makes concrete. Pebble people vs. putty people. Keep your promises. Write from the center of the paradox. Is that Kindergarten reductive or Zen mystical? It’s both. Keep a box of Post-It notes handy as you read *Story Trumps Structure*—you are going to need them. This book is a treasure chest of writing gems.

Most amazing of all to me is that Steven, a best-selling author of thrillers, is not an outline writer. He’s a more organic and intuitive sort, a “pantser” supreme. Part II of this book is not only a manifesto of intuitive writing, it is the only practical guide I have ever read on how to actually do it. Believe it or not, literary writers will find his approach as useful as anyone. Steven can break down story like a professor of mechanical engineering, but he can also draw a memorable writing lesson from watching his daughter brush her hair. Never before have I read a book that’s as useful to both sides of the outline/intuitive divide.

You’ll see what I mean. When Steven relates a simple principle for conceptualizing how protagonists solve problems—wit or grit, skill or will—he quips, “I like that. It’s easy for me to remember.” Later on he tosses off sentences like, “We humans have agathokakological hearts.” Agathokakological? Well, yes. Steven’s discussion of this word that my spell checker doesn’t recognize is instantly memorable. And if you’re looking simply for inspiration to write, just wait until Part IV of this book. His thoughts on theme have revolutionary force. The last line of that section is the best, truest, and most profound statement of the purpose of fiction that I have ever read, period. (Don’t peek!)

Several years ago, Steven was looking for an agent. I had the pleasure of several long and enjoyable phone conversations with him. I didn't win the contest, but Steven won a fan. With this book he's won more than that: He's won a student and has made an admirer of a guy who's himself studied, written, and taught quite a bit about fiction craft. Whether you are new or a longtime pro, you'll learn much from *Story Trumps Structure*.

I don't think any fiction writer can fully explain the process or give you every tool, and maybe no one should. But Steven James comes close. Enjoy the journey to the mountaintop that you are about to take. The view from where Steven James sits is breathtaking.

Donald Maass

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